

Simon Roberts

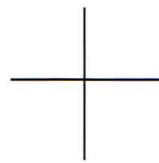
The Meaning Of 'Motherland'

The Persistence Of Yearning For An Origin

Written by Rosamund Bartlett

OTCHIZNA

THE ONE WORD THAT SUGGESTS FATHERLAND AND MOTHERLAND TOGETHER



Entrance To The Food Market, Khabarovsk, October 2004

Khabarovsk lies at the confluence of the Amur River and its tributary, the Ussuri, on the far eastern coast of Russia, 25 kilometres from China. In 1969 Soviet and Chinese soldiers fought a bloody battle over a land dispute in the region. Since 1984 tensions have eased and there is now a substantial cross-border trade: the Russians buy cheap clothing, food and video games, and the Chinese buy timber and fertilizers.



Order Of Maternal Glory Dinner, Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal, December 2004

In Soviet times, women who bore five or more children were awarded a medal, the Order of Maternal Glory, for their contribution to Soviet life. Here in the village of Khuzhir, on Olkhon Island, some of medal winners gather for a celebratory dinner. The growth of a capitalist economy has contributed to drop in the birth rate. Along with falling life expectancy rates for men, Russia has the fastest falling population of any country in the world.



Airport Departure Lounge, St Petersburg, December 2004

St. Petersburg was renamed Leningrad after Lenin's death in 1924. It was a hub of Stalin's nineteen thirties industrialization programme but he feared it as a rival power base. His purge of the Communist Party began in 1934, following the assassination of communist chief Sergey Kirov. In 1991 the residents of Leningrad voted to rename the city St Petersburg.

Russians are exacting when it comes to concepts that are particularly important to them. They have as many as three words denoting ‘native land’, for example. Otchizna, the one word that suggests fatherland and motherland together – a word that cleverly combines the root-word for ‘father’ [otets] with a female ending – is actually the least used. Like otechestvo [‘fatherland’], it sounds high-flown and official to Russian ears and is mostly used in poetry. By contrast, rodina [‘motherland’] is used by every section of the population and its associations are far more intimate. If otchizna and otechestvo relate to the country in which one is a citizen and are words most often deployed by governments for political ends, rodina is the place where one is born, a familiar place that has always been there. It is the place where one feels a sense of belonging – a warm hearth to which one longs always to return. Rodina is identified with the nation’s soul and the endless desire Russians have for a mother-figure.

Rodina may be the most emotive word in the Russian language. The fact that it is also impossible to translate adequately says something about its close relationship to questions of national destiny, the Russian sense of self, and to the enduring belief in the country’s messianic future. “Every nation has a motherland”, wrote the religious philosopher Georgy Fedotov in 1915, “but only we have Russia”. The deepest source of patriotism in Russia accordingly lies not in pride in national achievements or military glory, but in love for the motherland, whose most visible expression is the extraordinary, almost physical attachment Russians have for their native landscape – an attachment which they are often at a loss to fathom. What Lermontov declared that he loved about his native country in his poem ‘Motherland’ was the “cold silence” of her steppes, the swaying of her “endless forests” and “her overflowing rivers, as large as seas”, but he could not explain why. If the essence of the Russian motherland is to be found in her boundless open spaces and huge skies, it is certainly also located in her more humble, meditative landscapes – clusters of spindly birch trees under cloudy skies, village churches next to modest ponds, and houses surrounded by snow. It is therefore not surprising to find that Russians are prone to experience homesickness very intensely. The great Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, who never returned to Russia from exile, even made a film about *toska po rodine*, which he described as “the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends; an attachment which they carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may fling them”.

Russian idealisation of their rodina has much to do with the associations stimulated by the root-word *rod*, which has to do with birth. The other words it gives rise to, such as *priroda* [‘nature’], *rodnoi* [‘native’], and *rodstvennik* [‘relation’], are all suggested subliminally by rodina. The fundamental association, however, is with motherhood. Rodina literally means ‘birth place’ rather than the more generic-sounding and impersonal English motherland – hence ‘Mother Russia’, ‘Mother Volga’ and ‘Mother Moscow’. The relationship Russians have with their mother earth is a deeply visceral one.



Lena River, Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, November 2004

The Sakha Republic constitutes nearly a fifth of Russia and is comparable to the size of India but with a population of only around one million people. 40 percent of it lies within the Arctic Circle and all of it is covered by permafrost. By November the Lena River has only iced over to a depth of about 5 metres. The authorities will not flatten an official ice road across the river until the ice is at least 10 metres deep. In winter the only way to get between the cities of Yakutsk and Aldan, other than by air, is to cross the frozen river.

Personifying the nation as a woman is nothing new, and certainly not exclusive to Russia, but worship of female divinities traditionally lay at the heart of its popular religion. So pronounced was the matriarchal nature of early pagan Russian society indeed that the veneration of mother earth was simply transferred to the Virgin Mary once Christianity arrived at the end of the 10th century and her protection sought instead. The link between the Church and the motherland was further strengthened after the fall of Constantinople in the mid-15th century. Called upon to liberate the Orthodox East and convinced of her special destiny, both the land and the people now became known as 'Holy Russia', represented by a newly powerful state. But it was at this time that the state's increasingly masculine face began to show itself.

The replacement in the 17th century of the icon of St. George, traditional protector of Holy Mother Russia, by a secular portrait of the tsar, initiated a process which culminated in Peter I declaring himself Emperor of an absolutist secular state and asserting the pre-eminence of the fatherland. The submissive motherland had passively to watch as Matushka Moskva was supplanted by the distant foreign-looking and foreign-sounding city of Sankt-Peterburg, centre of a new fatherland whose persona was equally contrived. Over the course of the 19th century, educated Russians became gradually aware of the gulf separating them from both their oppressive rulers and the country's enslaved, suffering people, with whom they by now had little in common. They were exiles in their own country. The growth of nationalism, however, stimulated them to re-discover their connection to the beleaguered motherland, and consequently reject the myth of the fatherland, together with the official patriotism it projected.

After 1917, the concept of the motherland was co-opted cynically into Communist propaganda for political ends, but Stalin knew that he was touching the nation's heartstrings when he appealed to Russians to defend her when Hitler invaded. The Second World War may have been called the Great Patriotic or Fatherland War, as had been the war of 1812, but the Soviet Union needed the rodina to call her sons to sacrifice themselves, as testified by posters depicting a stern-looking, darkly clad mother underneath the slogan 'Your Rodina-Mother Summons You!'. And Rodina was the name given to the fifty-two metre high statue of a mother-figure in flowing robes erected to commemorate the battle of Stalingrad. It is a concept which has not yet lost its currency even in post-Soviet Russia. "Rodina is a mother you don't choose", said one respondent in a recent survey, "but take it away from me and I'll die".



Eternal Flame, Field of Mars, St Petersburg, December 2004

St. Petersburg was founded in the early 1700s after Peter The Great captured what was a Swedish outpost on the Neva River, making the city Russia's capital and a window on the West. The Field of Mars was the setting for Tsarist military parades and drills for regiments of imperial guards and, after 1917, used as a burial site for heroes of the Revolution. The eternal flame was lit in 1957, in memory all people of St Petersburg who died in war or revolution.